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SUBJECT: YAWN: BURMESE REGIME RECESSES NATIONAL CONVENTION

REF: 05 RANGOON 1361

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime recessed its National Convention (NC) on January 31, ending the third session of an indefinite process to produce a new constitution that accords the military preeminent governing powers. The GOB did not announce a date to reconvene the NC, although a senior general intimated that it would not be until the end of the year. Delegates at this session describe the Convention to us as a dreary affair, devoid of meaningful discussion. The proceedings consist mostly of pedantic lecturing and recital of regime position papers. Few people among the general public pay any attention to the process, which has excluded the democratic opposition. The continued participation of ethnic groups, and the question of whether they secure limited autonomy from central control, remain the only interesting angles to the NC, but these issues remained unresolved at the close of the latest session. End Summary.

12. (U) On January 31, the Burmese regime recessed its third session of National Convention and freed 1,000-plus hand-picked delegates to return to their towns and villages throughout the country. With the exception of rare and restricted weekend passes, authorities had confined the delegates for the duration of the session to the sealed-off Convention site, a training facility of the mass-member USDA organization north of Rangoon. This latest session of the constitution-drafting process began in early December (reftel) and lasted just over eight weeks.

13. (U) The SPDC's Secretary-1 (the third ranking member of the junta), Lt Gen Thein Sein, presided over the closing plenary session as Chairman of the National Convention Convening Commission. In his remarks, Thein Sein recalled that delegates had discussed--though not formally adopted--basic principles for the distribution of executive and judicial powers, legislative functions, citizenship, and

the role of the Tamadaw (armed forces). Thein Sein observed that the delegates had "expressed their support for the explanations of the Work Committee chairman." (Note: By all accounts, the GOB's Work Committee, comprised of senior military and government officials, pre-drafted the new constitution in 2003 with no intention of allowing the NC process to significantly alter language, especially chapters that accord the armed forces preeminent governing powers. End Note.)

¶4. (U) The GOB, which has never offered a timeline for the National Convention or its "road map to democracy," did not announce when it intends to reconvene the NC. Thein Sein told delegates, however, that "the coming sessions will be held when the end of the present year is drawing nearer, during which farmers have less work," intimating that the NC will not reconvene until after the October-November harvest season. The GOB claimed that "99.07 percent of the delegates entitled to attend" were present at the final session. Attendance was compulsory, but the regime's mouthpiece daily, the New Light of Myanmar, did not offer any explanation for the absence of ten of the 1,079 delegates nor why the attendance rate had dropped from 99.44 percent at the December 5 opening ceremonies.

¶5. (C) The latest NC session, like those that preceded it, held little interest for delegates. Attendance at daily workshops, group sessions, and committee meetings was mandatory. NC authorities discouraged any discussion and committee leaders simply recited lengthy text of regime-drafted constitutional language and position papers. One participant told us that on some days meetings lasted a mere thirty minutes. Delegates then spent the rest of their time fighting boredom at the isolated site. Another delegate told us of informal tea-house chat sessions at the NC, where some military officers expressed shared frustration with the controlled process, but claimed they could do little about it, urging civilian delegates "to go along with the program."

¶6. (C) Comment: Although the regime appears obsessed with the National Convention, devoting extensive space in the state-controlled media to its daily proceedings, the Burmese people ignored it. Those few who bothered to watch it on TV news saw footage of regime officials lecturing or reciting long texts to bored delegates, many of whom were caught dozing on camera. Since the regime excludes the democratic opposition from the process, no one in Burma finds it compelling to watch rubber getting stamped.

¶7. (C) The continuing participation of many ethnic groups remains of interest. Ethnic leaders have debated this issues, with some arguing the NC is their only opportunity to gain any autonomy. Others remain skeptical that the GOB will cede any control and warn those ethnic leaders who participate that they will lose ethnic support when they fail. This latest, tedious session did not resolve this key issue for future peace and stability. End Comment.

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